DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 774 JC 990 023

AUTHOR Carson, Barbara Harrell
TITLE Bad News in the Service of Good Teaching: Students Remember Ineffective Professors.
PUB DATE 1996-11-00
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Lilly Conference on College Teaching (16th, Oxford, OH, November 22-24, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Faculty; Graduate Surveys; Higher Education; *Learning Motivation; Motivation Techniques; Participant Satisfaction; *Student Evaluation of Teacher Performance; *Student Needs; Teacher Characteristics; *Teacher Effectiveness; *Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Rollins College FL

ABSTRACT

A request for narratives concerning their most effective and most ineffective professors was sent to 222 graduates from Rollins College (Florida). The narratives covered a period of 26 years, from 1964 through 1990. The responses suggest three dominant characteristics shared by ineffective professors: (1) lack of passion for their subject matter; (2) inability to connect students to academic subjects; and (3) indifference or hostility to students. By isolating and focusing on specific behaviors that graduates linked with their professors' pedagogical failures and presenting those failures in isolation, the narratives bring to life familiar generalizations about ineffective professors and suggest strategies for improvement, even of good teachers, whose own practices may reflect some of the troubling practices. Narratives provided in each section of the paper collectively suggest that students, in spite of all their apparent detachment, want teachers to share with them a passion for their academic fields, and that students are most likely to become engaged in that passion under the guidance of people whom they care about and who, they believe, care about them. (AS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 425 774

Bad News in the Service of Good Teaching: Students Remember Ineffective Professors

Barbara Harrell Carson
Theodore Bruce and Barbara Lawrence Alfond Professor of English
Rollins College
Winter Park, Florida

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
B. H. Carson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
1

JL 990 023

Bad News in the Service of Good Teaching

Abstract

Two hundred twenty-two students who graduated from a four-year liberal arts college between 1964-1990 responded to a request for narratives concerning their most effective and most ineffective professors. Analysis of the descriptions of the ineffective professors suggests three dominant characteristics shared by ineffective professors: lack of passion for their subject matter; inability to connect students to academic subjects; and indifference or hostility to students. By isolating and focusing on specific behaviors that graduates link with their professors' pedagogical failures and presenting those failures in isolation, the narratives bring to life familiar generalizations about ineffective professors and suggest strategies for improvement, even of good teachers, whose own practices may reflect, in small, some of the troubling practices.

Bad News in the Service of Good Teaching: Students Remember Ineffective Professors[1]

I suspect that most American professors have, at some time in their careers, drawn comfort from Henry Adams' well-known assurance about a teacher's influence on eternity. Like so many things in life, of course, this notion is double-edged. Usually we focus on the exhilarating implications: the good we do for students will live after us. But the truth is that the hurt we cause lives on too. This was brought powerfully home to me recently in testimony that came my way from over two hundred graduates of my college whose memories of their undergraduate experiences offered compelling evidence of the lingering presence, even after three decades, of painful or disappointing encounters with professors. Here is one of those memories:

> Broke my arm--was on strong pain medication. My paper was almost done, but needed work and was not yet typed. It was the day before it was due. I could not move my fingers. [My professor] refused to let the paper be a day late without lowering grade instantly to a "C." The entire semester grade was based on that paper and a final. . . . It was really no big deal in the scheme of life, but what purpose was served by being a jerk . . . ?

And here is another:

> I remember one professor in my major who clearly was brilliant and knew even the minute details of political science and theory. He was, however, unable to share that knowledge effectively. He . . . lived in an ivory tower. He never left that tower and it showed in the classroom. He showed us daily that he was smart

> and knew his "stuff," but my response was, "Who cares? So what?" If you can't share your knowledge by teaching others, you don't belong in the classroom no matter how many articles you've published or how many academic accolades you've won.

And one more--a short, poignant recollection:

> I tried to change so much for [this] professor, and nothing seemed to please. Almost thirty years later that still frustrates me.

These recollections--written from eight to twenty-five years after the students left the college classroom--were among responses to a letter I wrote in the spring of 1995 to graduates of Rollins College from the even years between 1964 through 1990. I asked the graduates to think back to professors, both in their major and in other courses, whom they regarded as highly effective teachers--and then to recall those remembered as less than effective. In both cases I asked the graduates to describe as fully as possible "specific incidents or other details (from inside the classroom or outside)" contributing to their evaluation of the teacher as highly effective or ineffective. I knew that I was claiming a significant time commitment from respondents; this was no easy, check-off survey. To my amazement, however, 222 graduates wrote back, many sending pages of stories.

It was probably natural that, as an English professor, I should want stories instead of statistics. Luckily, new quantitative work wasn't really needed to establish the characteristic of outstanding college teachers. In the last quarter century, repeated studies (including Kenneth Eble, 1970; Joseph Lowman, 1984; A.W. Chickering and Z.F. Gamson, 1987; H.W. Marsh and J.U. Overall, 1990; Stephen Brookfield, 1990; Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini, 1991) have arrived at remarkably similar conclusions about the qualities that distinguish effective from ineffective teachers: (1) Outstanding teachers love the subjects they teach; (2) they respect and they like their students; and (3)

they are committed to and skilled at connecting the two things they care deeply about--their subject matter and their students.

Powerful as those generalization were, however, what had led me to send my letter to the alums was a desire to ferret out the specifics underlying the generalities. I wanted to know what students mean when they say that good teachers love their subjects. What professorial actions convince students of this passion? What do professors do to convey to students that they like them? On the darker side, I wanted to hear real voices describing what professors did to earn their students' censure. How, from the students' perspective, had the professors failed them? And, perhaps most important, I wanted to learn how students feel and act as a consequence of these behaviors. I have discussed the memories of effective professors in other forums.[2] In this paper, I want to suggest that we listen to the grimmer tales.

Obviously, we need to be cautious in interpreting these memories. Students looking back on their college careers can, like the rest of us, call out all their self-defense mechanisms; they can still, decades later, blame their professors for their own failures. But, as a whole, the graduates' responses have a ring of truth.

Looking at the negative side of teaching isn't as much fun as the other approach; it's not as uplifting; it doesn't generate the same sense of self-congratulation. But there are several reasons for listening to these darker stories. They can, of course, help us identify ineffective teaching in all those folks in offices around us. Even more important, though, is what they can do for those of us who consider ourselves good teachers, by drawing our attention to personal weaknesses that may stand in the way of our helping our students as much as we might. And they can do that by presenting in a magnified form flaws that may exist in small, in us.

Of course, other writers have tried to get at the characteristics of good teaching using this underbelly tactic. Ken Eble (1985) in The Aims of Teaching pointed to "the seven deadly sins of teaching": arrogance, dullness, rigidity, insensitivity, vanity, self-

indulgence, hypocrisy. To those he added sloth and then suggested that pride is behind most of them. His list strikes me as on target, but I'd like to categorize what my respondents said in a different way, focusing not on the personal defects in professors *causing* bad teaching, but on its manifestations--what students experience. In moving from a consideration of effective to ineffective teachers, I had expected to find a variation on Tolstoy's comments on families: I figured good teachers would resemble one another, while the bad ones would all be bad in their own ways. Surprisingly, the ineffective professors described by the Rollins graduates were not only very similar to each other, but also virtually mirror-images of their effective colleagues: They didn't communicate a passion for their subject matter; even if they were described as brilliant as well as good, kind people--they didn't manage to connect their students to their academic subjects; and, most important of all from the perspective of the former students, these professors conveyed indifference or hostility to their students (or failed to respect them in other ways).

Loving the Subject

Again and again students described the agonizing dreariness of being in a classroom with professors who didn't seem to enjoy what they were teaching. The repeated themes were absence of energy, enthusiasm, inspiration. The composite picture that develops is of a teacher who walks into class tired, who appears bored by the subject and uninterested in the presentation.

Graduates wrote: "I am sure that he was a decent sort of fellow outside of the classroom, but inside of it I pitied him. . . . [He] arrive[d] in class with no gleam in his eye for his topic and no joy of his trade"; "she was capable of turning a discussion of a fine novel into a slog through the thickest quagmire. . . . She was well prepared for her classes, but she left her classes adrift in a lifeless sea"; "he usually sat during the lecture and delivered his notes in a very monotone fashion. There was no energy and no real

interaction between the students and him, although I could tell he wanted interaction." The most frequently cited source of boring classes was teaching "straight from the book"--the single phrase most often associated with ineffective professors: "[The professor] just reiterated what was in the text and never deviated from [that] material. . . . . I thought, 'Why am I paying for this . . . ?"

Aware of the contagious quality of a professor's enthusiasm, students described the opposite kind of transfer too. Twenty-five years later, one graduate was still puzzled by the teacher who "expected people to love the subject which he . . . was not good at making . . . interesting." A sense of disappointment and betrayal echoes through the responses: students remember going to class with an interest in the subject, only to have the interest dashed on the shoals of the professor's dullness. Such dullness, I've concluded, is not a victimless failing. One of the most vivid reminders of the damage such a teacher can cause to a student's hunger for learning came from the graduate who told this story: "I remember being so excited about the topic--taking my text home and delving into it faithfully--underlining, scribbling notes, listing questions--then getting to class and sitting silently through a lecture covering, almost verbatim, what I had just labored through. In fact, the lecture was far less interesting than the reading. No discussion was held other than his asking a few pointed, knowledge-based questions that required recollection as opposed to thought. Then, and I swear this is true, three classes into this experience he was still lecturing on what I had completed the first night of reading. It's distressing when book work is more lively and interesting than class time--especially when it's a class of five people. I rarely brought myself to attend the class and more often than not discovered this action to be effective time management. This is the death of teaching."

Such voices personalize the theories now emerging from brain research which underscore the inseparability of the cognitive and the affective: how we feel as we learn is intimately connected to how well we learn and how long we will remember what is learned (Zajonc, 1980). The physiology of this connection is becoming increasingly clear. When

we respond intensely to something, studies show, stress hormones are released, exciting the amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for transforming impressions or short term memories into long-term memories. The greater the emotional excitement, the stronger both the original imprinting and the recall (Trudeau, 1996). Contrary to those who argue that what is most important to learning is content and that the exciting professor is merely an entertainer pandering to students' desires for fun, such research suggests that the exciting classroom is the one where the most learning is likely to take place.

As a further refutation of the notion that students are merely looking for entertainment, the graduates' descriptions of effective teachers echoed with declarations of their rigorous standards ("The hardest C- I ever earned")--standards that in themselves suggested the professor's love of, respect for, and and con mitment to the discipline. On the other hand, complaints about tough courses were virtually absent from descriptions of ineffective teachers. Instead, ineffective teachers were frequently associated with low expectations both for their students and for themselves: "Mickey Mouse assignments"; classes where "thinking didn't much come into play"; "light and painless" classes where "I didn't learn anything"; labs where "he gave my lab partner and [me] our project, showed us how to do it and gave us a 'B'"; lectures and discussions "geared to the bottom of the class"; classes with "heavy workload[s] of just memorizing things and not understanding them."

Sometimes such criticism came from students who were fond of the professor in their relationships outside the classroom. A 1990 graduate wrote: "I loved this man to death as a person, but he never challenged me to understand the material. He was very nice, kind, tried to be helpful, but he allowed me to memorize and recite or repeat, so I never truly learned or understood, although I got A's and B's in the classes. He never challenged me even though he was a brilliant man." Just as that student traced her disappointment in her professor to his unwillingness to challenge students, another graduate (who also later became friends with his former professor) linked his similar

feelings to his professor's failure to hold himself to high standards. The professor just didn't "[commit] enough time and energy into planning the goals of the course," the student wrote. "Things happened from day to day, and while not awful [the class] was not very focused." Behind the obvious complaint that the professor's lack of planning made learning difficult is the unvoiced, but perhaps more important, insight: Professors who fail to convince students that they care about the material of the course and the quality of the class are likely to find the same lack of caring reflected in the faces on the other side of the desk.

Connecting Students and Subject Matter

The references in the last two stories to professors who were "brilliant" and "nice" and "kind," but ineffectual suggest that often the problem with such professors is not that they do not have passion for their subject or an interest in their students, but that they are not skilled at linking the two or are oblivious when students have trouble with the subject. Illustrating this, one student spoke of a professor who "loved his topic and had been teaching it for ages. But he loved his topic too much and got caught up in [it], rather than noticing whether anyone was learning anything or gaining his love of the topic."

Graduates traced one source of the failure of their ineffective professors to make such connections to their absence of organization. The words "rambling," "disorganized," "vague," "prone to digression," "unstructured," "muddled" echo through the narratives. Trying to analyze the source of such problems, a 1982 graduate wrote: "I remember a professor who was so disorganized in class that she never made a single effective point . . . she rambled from one subject to the next without revealing recognizable patterns, or illuminating significance of any kind. She could not isolate a single significant idea and then teach it. Rather, I feel that she saw too many ideas and then could not relate them in

easy-to-follow steps, so they could be learned. Some teachers (some people) see too much and are unable to dissect their knowledge into learnable steps. These people cannot teach."

Another graduate remembered a professor who "did not have a plan for class. After class you wonder[ed] what he had in mind to do that class period. At the end of the course you wonder[ed] what the instructor's purpose for the course was. I'm allowing for having a plan and then changing course midstream to adapt a more appropriate plan. This instructor didn't seem to have ANY purpose. Sometimes it's a good idea to change directions. This teacher did not have any direction in the first place."

Next to a lack of organization, the inability to explain ideas clearly and at the students' level raised the most ire in the Rollins alums--and the most frustration. Their stories were vivid reminders of how it feels to be in the classes of such teachers. One former student recalled a professor who "would say sentences to us and leave words blank, expecting us to fill them in. We had no clue as to what he was getting at!" (Haven't we all been in classes like that? "Now, nineteenth-century literature is widely known to be _____?" Wide professorial smile. Quizzical wrinkle in professorial forehead. Encouraging hand motion. Students scrambling desperately to help out: "Romantic?" "Socially aware?" "Long?") Describing her experience of a similar situation, another graduate wrote: "It was like having a language barrier always confusing things."

A different emotion--I sense smoldering anger--dominated this memory: "He was a very skilled person in his field and couldn't understand why this ability didn't come to everyone just as easily. His idea of explanation was repetition. 'You don't understand this concept? Let me say the same thing again a little louder, with growing frustration; there, maybe you'll get it.' At one point . . . he got so frustrated at a few students' stances that he closed the subject, declaring that he couldn't discuss something that nobody understood. He, more often than not, was a member of the brawl rather than the referee guiding people from the ruckus of confusion to understanding."

In discussing professors who failed to engage their students with the subject matter, graduates pointed to two other major complaints: the absence of variety in approaching the subject and the lack of active student involvement in the class. "We were lectured to, not communicated [with]" was a typical complaint. You can almost hear the "gotcha" in this story of such a class: "I had a . . . teacher who taught students by rote. The class was highly structured and there was little room for exchange between students or students and teacher. When a classmate complained, the professor claimed that this was the 'Harvard method': I subsequently attended Harvard and learned that this was not true."

Another repeated charge against ineffective professors was their penchant for overloading classes with theories or abstractions, unanchored in real life. One alum remembered the business professor (in his former career, actively engaged in the business world) who read "aloud from the textbook": "If he only knew that his students would learn more from his own experiences, but for some reason he felt compelled to recite theory. . . . what a waste." Another recalled an anthro-soc class where "the professor lost the point of relating material to life and experience. . . . This has been a long time ago . . . , but now my recollection of the professor as a person is that of an inaccessible, somewhat aloof and unfriendly acquaintance."

Liking the Students

The leap in the assessment last cited, where the graduate moved from a description of the professor's inability to connect the subject with the students, to the conclusion that the professor was unfriendly, may not be the non sequitur it initially seems. Indeed, it points toward the most frequently mentioned and most emphatically denounced trait of ineffective teachers--not awkwardness in classroom techniques nor even lack of enthusiasm for the subject, but the absence of deep personal concern for and respectful connection with their students. The centrality of this kind of relationship in the educational process

has been corroborated by Richard Light (1990, 1992) in his recent work with the Harvard Assessment Seminars. Other studies also indicate that, in fact, the characteristic of teachers that seems to be most positively correlated with student learning and satisfaction with their education (some studies say the only positive correlation) is personal interaction between faculty and students (Willson & Gaff, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

The Rollins alums spoke movingly of the difference such professors made in their lives: the professor who popped into lab late at night and helped students make their way through a difficult experiment; the professor who brought a deli supper to a student struggling to complete a senior thesis; the professor whose open house made it easier for one student to "see her as a person rather than a lecturer and also [made me] feel like she appreciated my opinions and insights"--an encounter that helped even a self-identified introvert like the writer "feel more comfortable expressing myself in the classroom." For some professors prospect of such involvement in students' lives may seem daunting. However, the graduate who saw evidence of personal coldness in the professor's inability to connect the subject matter to the students' lives suggests that a personality transplant (or a Martha Stewart training session) may not be required for professors to achieve such a connection. Often, just acknowledging the students' real and separate existence, having some sense of what they know, and recognizing the contexts within which they are living and learning may be enough to establish the personal connection that makes learning possible.

Professors who failed to give their students such respectful caring lived vividly in the graduates' narratives. Among these professors, unavailability (both literal and emotional) and lack of personal interest in students were seen as going hand in hand: "The professor . . . was so wrapped up in [her] work that there was no interest in ours"; ". . . he was so involved in his subject matter that he lost sight of the student. He failed to recognize when a student was having trouble grasping the concept." Another student remembered a professor who "had a wonderful background [in his field]. He was much in

demand, and a respected published author. However, he was unavailable to students. . . . His persona was a cold indifference. His attitude seemed to be: Come up to my standards and we will be able to communicate."

Respondents also remembered with censure professors who showed no concern for their personal lives. As one writer explained, ". . . there is nothing worse than feeling as if your personal life doesn't matter. Students don't exist in a scholastic vacuum, particularly in college. The good teachers realized this and used it to be more effective teachers as well as people; the bad teachers ignored this reality. . . ." The causal connection between student learning and professorial caring was directly addressed by the student who wrote: "The only professor in the . . . department that I didn't get much from didn't seem too interested in me as a person. So I didn't care much for her class." The triangulation of interest is fascinating here: to be interested in the subject matter, the writer suggests, students need to know that the professor is interested in them.

The graduates found another signal of the absence of caring in their professor's lack of encouragement in the classroom. The tales echoed with descriptions of teachers who tried to turn fear and confrontation into teaching techniques. A number of graduates offered insights into how it feels to sit in the classes of such intimidating professors. "I never wanted to go to class. They made it hard to enjoy the subjects because they were associated with them," one wrote. Speaking of a teacher who regularly embarrassed students in class, one graduate remembered: ". . . we dreaded class and sat through each hour in fear. (When we had all failed to accomplish some task, we were told we had fallen into the mud.)" Another remembered a professor who "always made us feel so stupid and really played up the few smarter kids (we were all smart actually)." Graduates regularly discounted the educational value of such intimidation. "Fear is not an effective long-term motivation for me," one person declared. "Instead of becoming angered and stronger as he intended," another wrote, "I became subdued and even less confident in myself."

Another graduate, now a college professor, described in pregnant understatement his own experience with a sharp classroom exchange: "I remember a professor telling me in class that my answers were 'bullshit.' That seemed to be an unconstructive criticism, I thought. Heck, I was only eighteen." It's easy to imagine that this professor may have seen his response as simply the honest evaluation of one adult to another or just an offhand comment or even a funny retort. But the writer's memory of the event reminds us that students can experience such comments as direct hits to their sense of self. I wonder if we don't all occasionally forget that the students walking into our classes are very new to this business of adulthood and that their confidence in their intellectual abilities (whatever their outward swagger) is likely to be very precarious.

Graduates told stories of similar encounters with detachment, discouragement, and intimidation during conferences with their professors, reminding us of the investment in courage required of some students just to enter a professor's office asking for help. That the pain and frustration of even one such disappointing encounter can reverberate for decades is underscored by the student who reached back twenty-three years to tell this story: ". . . I was having difficulty in a . . . class, and was not clear on several points. I went to the prof, explained I was having difficulties and wanted to clarify some things. I must have caught him on a bad day, because his answer to me left me with the distinct impression that he really didn't have the time (or inclination!) to help me personally, that I was bright enough to get it, just read it again!! I would advise any prof to make time for a student who asks for help. It sometimes takes a lot of soul-searching for the student to ask for help in the first place."

Unfortunately, students who did manage to claim their professor's time in conferences sometimes found their confidence battered in the exchange. Graduates repeatedly recalled the professors who told them that they shouldn't major in art, that they couldn't write, that they would never make it as a physician--these memories from students who are now an artist and art educator, an attorney, and a specialist in internal medicine.

It's possible, of course, that the professor's negativism was just the goad each needed to galvanize his or her determination to succeed. But that's not how the students experienced such discouragement.

Another frequently mentioned expression of a professor's lack of caring and respect for students was unfairness--one of the major charges leveled at ineffective teachers. Alums located this unfairness in tests on material not covered or never discussed in class; in suspected preferences for men or for women students; in grading systems that seemed unclear, unreasonable, or arbitrary; in requirements changed after the course began. Above all, they spoke of the pain caused when a professor displayed favoritism. And these are not teenagers, but adults out of college for five to thirty-one years. From 1980 comes this memory: "Another professor had, like, groupies who followed him around like he was the guru. I perceived, probably incorrectly, that since I wasn't part of his group, that he didn't perceive me as being cool. I resented that." A graduate from ten years later extended that insight into how students feel in the face of such favoritism: "This is a difficult feeling to go through as a freshman: to know or think that a professor doesn't want to know or like you. . . . It can worry [students] that they won't do well in their class because they aren't 'friends' with [their professors]." And from still another came this succinct evaluation of the situation: ". . . having class 'favorites' [is] no fun if you're not the favored one."

One of the surprises in reading former students' accounts of professorial unfairness was the number of times they remembered being falsely accused of academic dishonesty. Of course, it's possible that the students protested too much. (Defending himself against an accusation of plagiarism, one still clueless graduate wrote: ". . . all I did was not use quote marks and references the right way.") But most of the stories are as convincing as this student's: ". . . he accused me of cheating on my final exam despite the fact that I sat directly in front of him. The charge was reversed, and he was very angry. Needless to say I never took another one of his classes." One plot appeared with surprising frequency in these stories: a professor accuses a student of plagiarism, without evidence, but based on

the atypical excellence of the student's work. Here's one such account: ". . . one of the younger profs in my major was grading my interdisciplinary humanities paper, and suspected it to be plagiarized. The paper came back to me with an F and a note that he prof had not yet been able to find the source, but the writing was not that of a freshman. This rash accusation almost undid me--I had written the whole paper myself. . . ."

Even darker narratives--still associated, I believe, with a failure in respect for students and lack of concern for their welfare--sprang from a trespass of the boundaries of the professional relationship that should both link and separate student and teacher. Here the graduates wrote of the professor who lost student respect when he "tried too hard to be a buddy"; the professor who came to an 8:00 class with the shakes or smelling of alcohol; the professor who burdened the class with personal problems, losing sight of the subject matter of the course in the glare of solipsism. Most poignant of all were the stories of sexual harassment, particularly those from an era when that behavior had no name. Students remembered classes peppered with "sexual innuendoes and sexist jokes and stories." Others recalled the professor who explained a low grade by saying that the writer's style was "too masculine" and the professor who "asked why I was in economics when I should be at home having children. I felt there was no chance for me to succeed" (that student changed her major to elementary education).

One graduate from the '80s described the lingering anguish of her even graver betrayal--"a very powerful experience" which left her feeling degraded "personally and intellectually" by a professor who, in class and in conferences, referred to her and other women in humiliating terms, boasted of his affair with a student, displayed "sexually oriented pictures of women" in his office, and kept singling her out with invitations for private conferences. When she finally realized what was going on, she wrote, "I had only enough courage to try to protect my grades by going to the Head of the Department and having him read all of my class work in case I was flunked. I was also then advised to

change my major [which she did]. . . . Today I am still angered . . . by this teacher's behavior. . . . I learned a lot at [college], in more ways than one."

These are not pretty stories. Yet I believe that hearing these darker voices is important. The professors they describe, drawn as they are from the extremes of poor teaching, are nominees for the Teachers' Hall of Infamy. As such they can function for us somewhat like the grotesques in Flannery O'Connor's short stories. Explaining the purpose of her distorted characters, who portray hyperbolically some of humanity's greatest flaws, O'Connor said that she needed such exaggerations: If people are deaf, she said, you have to shout. These portraits of ineffective teachers can be seen as our students' shouts, making it possible for us to detect in their Brobdignagian volume our own smaller flaws. In my own case, I see in the description of that professor's cold response to student queries during conferences my own more than occasional impatience, my tendency to discourage drop-in visits by putting on the smile that greets but doesn't really welcome, my defensiveness when students come by to ask how they can improve a grade.

These grimmer stories can also remind us, perhaps even more pointedly than their positive counterparts, of the awe-ful power teachers possess, since bad teachers like good ones, can change lives. They can turn students away from subjects and lead them to change majors--and, consequently, life direction; they can dampen their joy in learning; they can cause them to doubt their ability and their worth. They can be the source of pain that lingers for decades. That students can encounter such professors even at a college like Rollins, which prides itself on the excellence of its teachers and in theory and in practice cultivates and champions good teaching, makes clear that no institution of higher learning can ignore this problem with impunity. Above all, I think, what these narratives teach us is that students, in spite of all their apparent detachment, <u>want</u> us to share with them our love of our fields, that they are hungry for intellectual passion--and that they are most likely to become engaged in that passion under the guidance of people whom they care about and who, they believe, care about them.

References

Brookfield, Stephen D. (1990). The skillful teacher: on technique, trust, and responsiveness in the classroom. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Eble, Kenneth. (1985). The aims of college teaching. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Eble, Kenneth. (1970). The recognition and evaluation of teaching. Salt Lake City: Project to Improve College Teaching.

Light, Richard. (1990). The Harvard assessment seminars: explorations with students and faculty about teaching, learning, and student life. First report. Cambridge: Harvard University Graduate School of Education, 1990.

Light, Richard. (1992). The Harvard assessment seminars: explorations with students and faculty about teaching, learning, and student life. Second report. Cambridge: Harvard University Graduate School of Education, 1992.

Lowman, Joseph. (1984). Mastering the techniques of teaching. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Marsh, H.W. & Overall, J.U. (1990). Cited in Faculty performance appraisal, ed. Alexander L. Gabbin et al. James Madiison University: Center for Research in Accounting Education.

Pascarella, Ernest T. & Terenzini, Patrick T. (1991). How college affects students: findings and insights from twenty years of research. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Trudeau, Michelle. (1996, September 16). How the brain works, Part 2--Science of memory. [Interview with Eric Kandel and James McGaugh]. All Things Considered. New York: National Public Radio. Transcript #2338, segment 6.

Wilson, Robert C. & Gaff, Jerry G. et al. (1975). College professors and their impact on students. New York: John Wiley.

Zajonc, Robert B. (1980). Feeling and thinking: preferences need no inferences. American Psychologist, 35, 151-172.

Footnotes

[1]An earlier version of this essay was presented as an address at the Lilly Conference on Teaching, Miami University of Ohio, November 1996.

[2]Originally presented at the Lilly Conference on Teaching at Miami University of Ohio in 1995, my initial analysis of the positive memories of the alumni appeared in revised form as "Thirty Years of Stories: The Professor's Place in Student Memories," Change, 28 (6), 10-17 (1996). Some of the descriptions of effective teachers cited in this companion-piece appeared in that publication.